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## Decolonising Digital Media Research Methods: Positioning African Digital Experiences as Epistemic Sites of Knowledge Production

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### Abstract

This introductory essay argues for a decolonial approach that privileges qualitative methods in ways that position African digital experiences as ‘epistemic sites’ of knowledge production in their own right in digital media scholarship. In proffering this argument, we challenge and confront elements of the global knowledge system, which are driven by an implicit ‘civilizing mission’ in which methods and intellectual approaches drawn from the West are seen as sacrosanct, while approaches and concepts emerging from the Global South are deemed to have a lower ontological density in the hierarchical ordering of knowledge. We explore methodological questions that relate to the studies carried in this Special Issue and consider various strategies for aligning digital media scholarship with Southern epistemologies – whether these are found in the ‘epistemologies of everyday’ popular culture or epistemologies emerging through the work of African activists and artists. Equally, we emphasise the value of methods that pay attention to issues of power and economic extraction to understand the very different roles of social media platforms in various African countries. The paper also considers how the precarious and contingent nature of infrastructure and African cities in general, demands methods that pay attention to issues of digital materiality and infrastructure. Finally, we discuss Big Data methods and the need for African researchers to establish themselves more firmly in this space.

### Keywords

Epistemic freedom, research methods, digital methods, Global South, decoloniality

This issue of ‘African Digital Media Review’, a Special Annual Issue of *African Journalism Studies*, broadly explores debates that emerged from the first African Digital Methods Symposium, “African Digi-methods”, which took place at Rhodes University’s School of Journalism and Media Studies in June 2019. The symposium was inspired by the annual Digital Methods Workshop Summer School for researchers from across the world hosted by QUT’s Digital Media Research Centre in Brisbane, Australia. The idea behind the Rhodes University symposium was to host a similar event on the African continent and thus allow established and emerging scholars to share ideas on innovative digital methods particularly suited to various circumstances in Africa. Jean Burgess and Axel Bruns, who co-hosted the summer school at QUT

and are leading scholars in digital media scholarship, attended the African digital research methods symposium. (Their commentary piece in this Special Issue reflects on some of the key methodological challenges in the field as well as the contributions carried in the issue.)

The symposium also featured a number of digital media researchers from within Africa and beyond. The primary aim was to create a global conversation with African digital media research and scholarship at its 'centre'. The symposium was underpinned by Brian Larkin's (2008) provocative but telling question in his study of Nollywood – what might Media Studies look like had it primarily developed on the African continent? Equally we can ask, as a number of seminal studies have done over the past five or six years (Chasi 2018; Chasi and Rodney-Gumede 2020; Willems 2014; Willems and Mano 2017), what it actually means to adapt existing digital media research methods from the Global North to the diverse contexts of Africa, and whether this might require a simple *rejigging* to account for parameters such as access to the internet, or indeed an entire epistemological shift to recognise African 'ways of being' and knowledge production. These contestable questions have been incorporated into this Special Issue, which features some of the papers presented at the Rhodes University symposium, submissions from an open call for articles, as well as a special reflective overview of the articles by Jean Burgess and Axel Bruns.

In this broad overarching Introduction to the Special Issue, we consider some of the most important issues for conceptualising African digital media research methods and we also reflect and engage with how Burgess and Bruns have situated the articles in the issue. We also briefly highlight some methodological gaps, particularly for exploring the most popular and widely used social media platforms in Africa such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

In general, as we discuss below, this Special Issue is underpinned by a decolonial approach to African digital media research methods, which challenges an entrenched over-reliance on Western methodological approaches. It is particularly motivated by the extant exclusion of alternative perspectives in mainstream research approaches and seeks to offer space to scholarly insights that invite us to rethink approaches largely drawn from studies conducted in splendid oblivion of conditions and experiences in non-Western contexts, Africa in this case.

### **(Re)asserting Knowledges and 'Ways of Knowing' from 'the Margins': A Decolonial Enterprise**

Our central argument in reflecting on digital media research and methods on the African continent is hinged on a decolonial approach that privileges qualitative methods (or mixing methods in a qualitatively driven way). The reasons for this approach, as we submit, are multiple but directly linked to the positioning African digital experiences as 'epistemic sites of knowledge production' in their own right (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This 'decolonial' approach

challenges and confronts global knowledge flows on digital experiences and helps to capture and mainstream some of the most unique forms of technological innovation and appropriation in Africa, as seen in the studies carried in this issue. From this approach, we cease to see methodological approaches and concepts developed in the Global South as having a lower ontological density in the hierarchical disciplinary base of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), which tends to privilege methodologies and concepts from the West, over approaches emerging from elsewhere. Thus, invoking the 'decolonial enterprise' not only challenges conventional interpretations of digital practices and experiences in Africa, but also throws into question the uneven intellectual division of labour (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) in which Global North scholarship produces concepts and theories that are then appropriated, sometimes without question, in the Global South.

There are several other factors worth noting in this debate. *Firstly*, the vast inequalities on the African continent creates extremes of material deprivation that can hardly be imagined through the normative assumptions inherent in most quantitative surveys and Big Data approaches that are extensively used in Western scholarship. In addition to this, African countries are characterized by a multitude of diverse cultures, languages and religions (Mabweazara 2020). Trying to gloss over these differences with quantitative approaches that tend to flatten or homogenise social experiences on the continent will only create a partial or limited snapshot at best. By focusing on the detailed picture of the African every day in different social contexts, we believe the researcher may gain unique insights rooted in African experience and meanings. Indeed, 'reversing the gaze' by privileging the voices and experiences of research participants facilitates more democratic listening (see Bickford 1996) and more deductive work leading to theory building. This resonates with what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls, 'epistemic freedom', the idea of African researchers communicating ideas 'from where they are' rather than blindly importing Western theoretical and methodological approaches as sacrosanct singular ways of knowing. However, such theoretical work need not be simply contingent to a narrow context, but might indeed be applicable to a shared global future, where theory from the South offers valuable tools to make sense of the current neoliberal world order (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) echoing Onwuegbuzie's (2002) notion of 'epistemological ecumenicalism'.

*Secondly*, and more importantly, qualitative methodologies are essential for developing decolonial scholarship that facilitates different ways of knowing that allow for the delinking from imperial mindsets and relationships (Mignolo 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Such decolonial methodologies shift our recognition of *difference* beyond a simple acknowledgement of different contextual understandings among our research participants, to a much deeper questioning of assumptions and difference. These approaches nudge us towards acknowledging different ways of knowing and systems of knowledge in which both the participants and the researcher are equally positioned, while recognising that usually only the knowledge of the

Westernised researcher is acknowledged as legitimate for interpreting the other (Smith 2012). However, unearthing indigenous knowledge systems and concepts is not a simple task, as unlike the totalising narratives of Western epistemologies, indigenous knowledge and narratives tend to be fragmented and partial (Robins 1997). It may indeed be a feature of Southern knowledge traditions to resist the universalism of Western epistemologies, as Nyamnjoh (2017) argues in his description of frontier Africans, whom he describes as inhabiting the borderlands of multiple knowledge traditions, where knowledge is always constructed through the social, and is convivial and plural.

In his description of modern Western knowledge as abyssal, Santos (2018) considers how its narrow binaries have served to render unsayable how modernity and the institutions of the modern state were produced through colonialism and the oppression of others. The abyssal line brackets all knowledge emerging from the South as incomprehensible and irrelevant beyond the binaries of truth and falsehood and instead relegates these to beliefs, opinion, and subjectivity to be processed as data and analysed through Western theory. Epistemologies of the South, De Sousa Santos (2018) argues, have generally remained outside of recognised and legitimised knowledge such as academic scholarship, but may emerge through the knowledge production of activists and artists in the Global South in their resistance to capitalism and colonialism. There are indeed examples of digital media scholars that draw on such marginalised epistemologies of the South. Bar et al (2016) conceptualise various strategies for the appropriation of mobile phones through Latin American popular cultural traditions rooted in activism. They draw on the work of the poet Oswald de Andrade, who penned the manifesto of the *antrópofago*, situating Brazil's origins in the ritualised swallowing and absorption of Bishop Sardinha by indigenous people. This notion of the *antrópofago* and *resistance through swallowing and absorption* underpins Tropicalismo, the Brazilian musical movement, but may also be applied to practices such as SIM card hacking. Thus, digital media scholars are able to draw on marginalised understandings previously dismissed as nonsensical, through the stewardship of epistemologies of the South by artists and activists who have preserved and rediscovered this knowledge. Bar et al. (2016) further argue that new uses and innovations emerge as users appropriate technology in what they argue to be a negotiation of power through a creative practice which in turn becomes a political process. As Bosch (2020) has shown, Western designed apps like Strava, which rely on gamification to embed cultural values such as competition, have been repurposed by South African users to promote self-improvement, motivation and a sense of community. Users are able to demonstrate agency and resist the inbuilt dominant cultural narrative of apps created in Western contexts. This points to the centrality of “contextual sensitivity and methodological pluralism” as highlighted by Marennet Jordaan’s article in this Special Issue.

African popular media can also provide particular epistemic saliences that resonate with the life experiences of urban Africans due to its common concern with everyday struggles in African cities, which reflect experiences that integrate seeming contradictions such as hope and want, aspiration and desperation (Barber 2014). It is through popular culture, some argue, that Africans are able to conceptualise themselves at once as part of a global order but also as marginalised, juxtaposing global imagery with the details of their everyday life (Newell and Okome 2013). Popular representations of digital media practices, such as the Ghanaian films about the “Sakawa boys” who engage in cybercrime, may provide more complex insights into social causes of such practices than the normative discourses in mainstream media (Oduro-Frimpong 2014). Equally, since local languages and cultures still flourish despite colonialism and neoliberalism, opportunities remain to rediscover and celebrate such knowledge. Nyamnjoh’s (2017) concept of the frontier African is indeed situated in the local folktales translated and retold by Nigerian author Amos Tutuola. This foregrounding of the knowledge inherent in African folktales is also discussed in Anthony Ambala’s article on digital storytelling in this collection.

Colonial narratives and ways of thinking remain dominant in many previously colonised spaces (Quijano 2000). In the world of social media in Africa, ICT for development discourses have often championed the rosy futures that would emerge if Africans for instance embraced the internet and the mobile phone to install apps to get their vegetables to market or spend their days on Wikipedia to become highly knowledgeable. These ‘techno-normative’ discourses focus on *what should be* (Willems and Mano 2017) and engender guilt by not recognising that, like everybody else in the rest of the world, Africans might also be using social media to entertain themselves, flirt and have fun (Sey and Ortoleva 2014). As the Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr (2020) contends, African intellectuals should engage in the imaginary labour of generating multiple and alternative visions of African futures that are not constrained by Western conceptual categories. This might be the key to understanding new pathways towards social change and how researchers might go about capturing detailed knowledge of the everyday while resisting normative fantasies of what people think they should foreground. As we contend above, we believe that this emerges from grounding qualitative research as much as possible in empirical experiences.

### **Sensitivity to Local Contexts and ‘Small Data’: Methodological Creativity and Innovations to Mainstream African Digital Cultures**

In our privileging of the *qualitative approach* and *the decolonial agenda* foregrounded above, we are wary of the dominance of the quantitative-qualitative debate, which we believe to be an unhelpful binary. Thus, while centering Africa as a legitimate “historical unit of analysis and epistemic site” from which to interpret digital experiences, we simultaneously argue for globalizing knowledge from Africa so as to foster ‘ecologies of knowledge’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni

2018) that advance a complementary dialogue between methodologies and concepts that come from very different 'epistemic locations', especially between the Global North and the South. This approach accommodates the qualitatively different nature of digital infrastructure, patterns of connectivity and access to digital devices for a typical African user.

Indeed, what is meant by "the internet" may differ radically depending on access, and one cannot conflate the always-on broadband access to streaming media typical of the developed world with what may be typical for those outside of the middle classes in the Global South: an internet experience characterised by intermittent text-based interaction with messaging apps (Donner 2015). In this issue, Indra de Lanerolle, Alette Schoon and Marion Walton call for the integration of issues of infrastructure and digital materiality into African digital methods. Issues of infrastructure, distribution and repair should indeed be central to media studies on the African continent (Larkin 2008). Here it is important to recognise that infrastructure is not only physical, but representational, and constructs particular subjectivities, whether this might have been the domination of the colonial subject through the communication of grandeur and power through infrastructure of the "colonial sublime" (Larkin 2008, 7), or the present perpetuation of such colonial power relations through neoliberal subjectivities of the self-sufficient private citizen, best symbolised in a country like Nigeria by the 'enclave infrastructure' of the generator (Larkin 2008, 246).

Increasingly, digital infrastructure on the continent has become visible through internet shutdowns during election periods, illustrating the power of the state. When the poor and the subaltern in post-colonial societies subvert and rechannel infrastructure to serve their needs, whether via illegal connection of electricity or illicit copying of DVDs, what Sundaram (2009, 12) calls the condition of 'pirate modernity', this not only makes hidden infrastructure inequalities visible, but also focuses attention on the agency of the marginalised to create alternative infrastructures that serve their everyday needs. The concept of 'pirate modernity' thus enables us to see how citizens of the Global South (Africa in this case) creatively circumnavigate local challenges to insert themselves into global digital media flows from which they are generally marginalised and enable local and indigenous digital media distribution (Eckstein and Schwarz 2014; Mabweazara 2020). Localised distribution may create translocal networks connecting the spaces of the margins with each other, such as the networks of hip-hop distribution connecting small towns in South Africa on the grey platform Datafilehost, so disrupting perpetual flows from the centre to the periphery that characterise the mainstream media (Schoon 2016).

By following Sundaram's (2009) demand that we move beyond the Eurocentric imagination of modernity to recognising 'pirate modernity', one might not only acknowledge the origins of

modernity in extractive colonial relations but also discover other digital media cultures not defined exclusively through absolute notions of property (Eckstein and Schwarz 2014). For example, digital media exchange over Bluetooth may be integral to the rituals of hospitality for the traveller in the desert, evidenced in the MP3 files collected by a music producer travelling in Mali entitled *Music from Saharan Cellphones* (Boon 2014). In African countries like Ghana, it is the creative energy of the informal sector that shifted economic researchers in the seventies to recognise the importance of studying the informal economy (Hart 1973). Similarly, digital media scholars in the Global South need to recognise the importance of studying the digital “grey” markets where the illicit and the entrepreneurial mix (Lobato and Thomas 2014). In African cities where formal institutions are often weak or absent, it is essential to study the contingent networks and arrangements that come into being to address this absence (Simone 2006). The conceptual tools suited to analysing such informalities in grey digital spaces such as street corner mobile repair shops, might indeed be found in the digital media scholarship of the Global South (see for example Ahmed, Jackson, and Rifat 2015). By exclusively using Western yardsticks to assess digital experiences in Africa, we inadvertently run the risk of not only glossing over, but even rendering invisible, issues of vital concern to local African contexts and experiences. This has dire implications for the conclusions reached, and the broader efforts to closely understand digital practices and cultures in Africa vis-à-vis developments elsewhere.

Thanks to “locally contingent strategies, innovations and appropriations” of digital technologies (Mabweazara 2020, 2), some of the strategies deployed to access and use digital technologies are rooted in the pervasive cultural orientation to interdependence or the notion of Ubuntu, which encapsulates what it means to be human in Africa, particularly that ‘a person is a person through other people’ (Mabweazara, 2020). This cultural context makes it possible for an individual to be connected in order for whole groups and communities to benefit. Nyamnjoh (2004, 54) writes about the phenomenon of ‘single-owner-multiple-user’ in West Africa, where most mobile phone owners serve as ‘points-of-presence’ in their communities by enabling others to pay or simply pass through to make calls to relatives. Thus, while questions of mobile phone ownership in poor regions of Africa may seem quantitatively lower than other regions, if one closely considers that people often share mobile phones, the user rate is likely to be much higher than the subscriber rate. This localised appropriation of technology not only calls for sensitivity to local contexts, but also calls for methodological creativity and innovations when researching African digital cultures.

### **Beyond ‘Silo-ized’ Digital Media Research Agenda and Scholarship**

The agenda we are setting here is not predicated on a radical dismissal of conceptual and methodological approaches from other parts of the world, nor is it anchored in “a localized research agenda of separatism” (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670) akin to ‘scholarly inbreeding’ or what Waisbord aptly frames as “silo-ized scholarship” (2015a, 585). Far from it. Rather, this Special Issue advocates the assimilation of wide-ranging approaches from all sources and parts of the world. In doing so, however, as Alatas argues, we need to adopt an independent critical approach that does not lose sight of “our own intellectual heritage” (2000, 27) – theorize, interpret the world from where we are located, unencumbered by Western methodological approaches that tend to impose rigid and standardised ways of interpreting social experiences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). The idea, therefore, is not to simply ‘reverse the gaze’ but rather ‘gaze into the world’ from where we stand. This methodological stance does not, however, mean closing our lenses to the rest of the world – it simply means ‘starting from what you see into the world’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) in ways that advance a complementary dialogue between methodologies and concepts that come from very different ‘epistemic locations’, but especially between the Global North and the South. Thus, in any efforts to capture and mainstream distinctive digital cultures and practices in Africa, we should equally guard against generating “essentialist models of knowledge that view regional studies as *existing in perfect isolation from the rest of the world*” (Waisbord 2015b, 31 emphasis added). This way, we contribute to the consolidation of “an academic community with a shared intellectual core” (Waisbord 2015a, 586) and yet remain critically aware of the importance of local *context* and cross-cultural, national and regional *differences*.

The point, clearly then, is not the pursuit of “parallel lines of research” approaches (Waisbord 2015a, 585) but to strive towards identifying areas of convergence and divergence, and mapping out of those dynamic methodological approaches that do not gloss over, generalise or inadvertently essentialise or demean constituent elements of comparative research. It should be about approaches that can best harness and showcase the diversity of digital cultures, as it is about connecting and ‘cultivating dialogue’ across national and regional scholarship. As Livingstone puts it, we should not underestimate how much we can learn from “*different cultures* or what can be achieved [through] the combined creative intelligence” of diverse but focused scholarship, sharing “insights and energies” (2003, 481 emphasis added). We should therefore avoid the pitfalls of ‘academic isolationism’ – operating in “research compartment[s] [that are], disconnected from the rest” (Waisbord 2015a, 585) – by bridging conceptual divides and contributing to “analytical cross-pollination” (Waisbord 2015b, 31) between Africa and the rest of the World, but especially the hegemonic Western scholarship. We thus argue in support of Edward Said’s (1991) proposal for counterpoint in music as a model for a different kind of critical reading, referring to two independent yet harmonious musical lines in a composition. Said’s contrapuntal model calls for moving beyond disciplinary belonging to take into account

the experiences from both imperialism and resistance, an approach which suggests that multiple perspectives from the Global North and Global South could operate in a parallel, contrapuntal way to lead to rich understanding of African everyday life.

Although comparative research is often seen as ‘theoretically demanding’ and producing “measurement out of context” by asserting “methodological and/or theoretical universalism at the cost of recognising cultural specificity” (Livingstone 2003, 482), its contribution has enriching and far-reaching implications. It opens up new avenues and invites us to address the transnational dimensions of emerging digital cultures and practices. In the words of Livingstone (2003, 478), one could also argue that “the choice *not* to conduct research cross-nationally requires as much justification as the choice to conduct cross-national research” (original emphasis), precisely because digital cultures, practices and emerging online forms of citizen engagement are now far more entrenched and widespread across national boundaries and regions, due to the wide reach of the Internet and its associated digital technologies.

### **Platform Capitalism, Data Colonialism and the Importance of Methodological Approaches that Capture Extractive Flows**

In focusing on the empirical and the everyday, however, researchers should be wary of simply celebrating creativity and innovation in ways that eschew the hidden global power relations embedded in the history of colonialism (Teer-Tomaselli 2018; Willems 2014), what Quijano (2000) refers to as the coloniality of power. This extension of the political to include the cultural legacy of colonialism allows researchers to incorporate important issues of cultural assimilation and ethnic tensions within a broader political economy framework. Such a framework can reveal the specifics of the relationships between multinational ‘platform’ companies, global telecommunication companies and particular African nation states. Researchers should resist glib totalising characterisations of social media platforms like Facebook on the continent and instead note its different adaptation and interpretation in each country and often inside countries, as it intersects with local social and political dynamics, levels of connectivity, economic development in different contexts. Indeed, these contextual realities shape the very provision of internet access and content, and often quite literally, the nature of the connectivity because governments can restrict, shut down, or influence access and affordance. Moving beyond a celebratory framework of connectivity, it is important to recognise the extractive character of data flows in which the details of everyday life are captured, commodified and sold to corporations and governments to enable tracking, classification and exclusion on a global scale (Couldry and Mejias 2019). Couldry and Mejias (2019, 2) term this ‘data colonialism’, a form of social relation which they argue, “combines the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing”.

Research in the Global North has for some time focused on issues of privacy and data surveillance, yet in the Global South, Big Data has tended to be framed in a celebratory manner (Arora 2016). Arora (2016) further notes that Big Data researchers have generally adopted the neo-liberal framing of inclusive capitalism that celebrates reconstituting the poorest of the poor through digital access as valuable customers at the bottom of the pyramid (BoP), enabling profits through economies of scale. An example is Facebook who has worked with local elites in 34 of Africa's 54 countries to provide, at least for stretches of time, variants of its so-called 'Free Basics', through which Facebook gives some level of 'free' access to some sectors of the population (Nothias 2020). First rolled out in Zambia in 2014, and then quickly extended to dozens of other African countries, it shifted from internet.org to the 'Free basics' app in 2015, but now most scholars view Facebook's ostensibly benign plan to 'connect the unconnected' for what it is -- a grab for early and significant market share and for securing the same kind of first-mover advantage they had enjoyed earlier in the decade, in more developed countries (Nothias 2018). Many of the USA-based companies are exceptionally profitable but are facing saturated markets in their home markets and see the developing world, and African countries in particular, as sources of growth for their products, services and profits. In researching Big Data in the Global South it is thus important not just to focus on the technological, but to foreground human agency by studying data activism and data justice (Milan and Treré 2019), such as the activism against the Facebook Free Basics App in India. Yet it is not only data corporations that need to be interrogated, but also the collaboration of states and non-governmental organisations in the production of open data. This includes various biometric projects and the mapping of marginalised spaces, where researchers should be questioning how such data might perpetuate "colonial regimes of surveillance" (Arora 2016, 1685).

In his analysis of black thought through the ages, Mbembe (2017) sets out the in-depth knowledge African scholars have of the history of colonial dehumanisation and African practices of resistance through reclaiming and reanimating a fractured humanity. He cautions that we are now entering an era where it is not only black Africans who are faced with such brutal dehumanisation, but that the algorithmic reduction of people into coded data and thus subject to constant surveillance is leading to "the becoming black of the world" (Mbembe 2017, 6). As increasingly people all over the world are reduced to the power of the algorithm to surveillance, classification, and exclusion, and rendered black in the stripping of their humanity, African digital media researchers might play a special role in recognising such digital dehumanisation and the struggles of those determined to reclaim their humanity in such digital spaces. In this context, the challenge for scholars becomes how to develop and deploy locally grounded or 'situated' methodological approaches which enable researchers to see through "...the universalizing pretensions of Western theorizing and evidence" (Mano 2009, 277), while at the same time, acknowledging and dealing with the universalising logic and capacity of these

mostly Western social media and global search behemoths, to shape contours of that which we are studying.

### **Plugging Gaps: New Epistemic Pathways and Future Methodological Directions**

It is also worth noting that Big Data approaches which are part of a repertoire of concepts and methodologies from the Global North's disciplinary base of knowledge, have dominated social media research, and indeed such approaches could be helpful in alerting researchers to patterns in the data they may not have been previously aware. However, as boyd and Crawford (2012) have long warned, Big Data triggers an utopian and dystopian rhetoric; moreover, Big Data are not always 'better data', as the sample of a data set needs to be taken into account and in the case of Twitter, for example, regardless of the number of tweets, a sample may not necessarily be representative. They further argue that Big Data can lose its meaning when taken out of context, and there are also serious ethical implications underpinning Big Data approaches.

It is important to note that Big Data on the African continent needs to be qualified as partial picture of public discourse, not only because often large portions of the population are simply not connected to the online space, making spaces like Twitter arguably the site of exclusively middle-class African discourse, but also because online discourses often take place outside of the algorithmic reach of Big Data. This is because such discourses frequently remain outside formal channels of data flow, like the networks of gossip and rumour circulating on the pavements of African cities – known as “radio trottoir” (Ellis 1989) – where messages that would never be allowed on the formal radio waves spread like wildfire. Walton's (2014) concept of 'pavement internet' similarly describes the discourses circulating in African online spaces that remain hidden from visibility, often simply because users do not have access to the networks and bandwidths that create indexable posts and can be crawled by search algorithms.

Increasingly, African users are migrating to private messaging platforms like WhatsApp for their political content, leading to the popular expression “same WhatsApp group” to describe members of the same political faction or similar political conviction. WhatsApp's popularity has increased because it circumvents the unreliable internet connectivity and bandwidth which limits rapid and fluid digital experiences (Mabweazara 2020). The application has thus become a primary venue for citizen deliberation, sharing of news (and misinformation), and the formation of counterpublics, making it one of the most powerful digital services in the world. WhatsApp's range of socialities and its easy to set up chat group functionality suggests it will grow quickly. This is also likely because, in Africa political ecosystems, where digital campaigning is burgeoning, the application is increasingly playing an important and leading role for political actors. Researching the information flows of WhatsApp in rigorous and ethical ways

remains a challenge for African digital media researchers as groups tend to be closed social spaces. Traditional qualitative methodological approaches that centre the phenomenology of the researcher, such as autoethnographies attuned to inner experiences (Kozinets 2015), thus remain relevant when researching these emergent digital spaces. Even when permission is granted by participants, WhatsApp does not offer researchers access to the application programming interface (API), thus preventing data mining via third party applications that enable analysis and visualisations of large-scale quantitative data.

While Big Data researchers have relied on API access, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have increasingly been limiting access to their platform data via their APIs and positioning themselves as gatekeepers for academic research. Bruns (2019) has referred to this as making researchers dependent on “corporate data philanthropy” and being subject to an ‘APIcalypse,’ honing in, as social media platforms limit access to even those engaged in purely scholarly inquiry. Political economy perspectives can help us think about and locate this foreclosing of previously viable research avenues and data-extraction methods, and indeed help understand broader materialities and power dynamics researchers face when dealing with the so-called FAANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) and other multinational social media companies based in China and other countries. When such data is indeed available for analysis, the validity of such algorithmic data should not remain unquestioned, as the contexts of people living in the Global South might not be incorporated in the original software design, so reproducing prejudices into social fact, such as the medical diagnostic apps oblivious to the diseases of the poor (Arora 2016).

Perhaps most relevant to the African context, boyd and Crawford further submit that limited access to Big Data potentially creates new digital divides and deepens divisions between scholars as the “class of the Big Data rich is reinforced through the university system: top-tier, well-resourced universities will be able to buy access to data...those from the periphery are less likely to get those invitations and develop their skills” (2012, 674). This uneven intellectual division of labour, seen by other researchers as a social engineering project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), further raises questions of critical skills which require a computational background and thus create new complex hierarchies of knowledge, which are sometimes also gendered (boyd and Crawford 2012). It is therefore not surprising that quantitative computational methodological approaches are a rare occurrence in African digital media studies, a point reinforced by our own experience in editing this special issue. The bulk of the papers submitted to our open call for papers and those ultimately accepted for publication after peer-review, were broadly steeped in qualitative digital methods, rather than quantitative approaches. While there is a risk of generalising, it is surmisable that this highlights the hierarchies of knowledge which underpin the adoption of methods as noted by boyd and Crawford above.

This point is further reinforced by one of the contributors in this Special Issue, Dani Madrid-Morales, who surveyed academic articles published over a five-year period (2015–2019) in some of the leading journals and identified the limited use of quantitative computational methodologies coupled with other challenges, including that of accessing quality data due to “the limited amount of African [...] content in commercial databases.”

However, in challenging the entrenched overdependence on Western scholarship and positioning Africa as an epistemic site of knowledge production (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), we should avoid the dangers of uncritically lurching to an equally perilous opposite end by blindly circumscribing our locus of analysis to ‘localised’ understandings that prevent the realisation of new understandings, explanations and depth of analysis reaching beyond local contexts (Alatas 2000). In this sense, therefore, we do not necessarily dismiss quantitative approaches out of hand simply because of a lack of skills but argue for mixing methods in qualitatively driven ways, which as we have submitted above, are more likely to highlight the granularity of African digital media experiences. As Burgess and Axel contend in their commentary article in this Special Issue, we should avoid “simplistic binary oppositions – whether between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ methods, between ‘data-driven’ and ‘ethnographic’ methods, or between ‘computational’ and ‘critical’ methods” and strive for ‘hybrid methods,’ which integrate a range of methodologies to critically engage with digital cultures in specific social contexts.

We therefore support the approach advocated by Latzko-Toth, Millette and Bonneau (2016) which draws on the seminal work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz to call for a focus on ‘small data’ which enables ‘thick descriptions’ of data. They argue that reducing the number of ‘data points’ while increasing their depth or thickness offers a richness to research by including the “sticky stuff that’s difficult to quantify – emotions, stories, worldviews – that get stripped through the processes of normalizing, standardizing ... that make massive datasets analyzable by computers” (Wang in Latzko-Toth, Millette, and Bonneau 2016, 201). Data can be thickened, they argue by conducting trace interviews with social media users, manual collection of digital traces and long-term observations akin to virtual ethnography. This is one approach which moves us away from the quantitative-qualitative binary, and researchers of African digital cultures might engage with some methods to more accurately capture the realities of everyday digital experiences on the continent. Moran and Robards’ article in this issue, offers a good example of how data about Facebook use can be thickened through the use of the scroll-back method to provoke conversations around particular posts. Although we privilege such qualitative approaches, we caution that researchers need to adapt these to the digitally mediated social contexts and engage in a practice of reflexive methodological analysis. As Markham (2013) advises, researchers must critically examine the limitations and possibilities of different methods and the insights they may deliver. Highlighting the important role of observation in ethnographic research, she questions the epistemic value of collecting enormous

quantities of digital material for analysis in the remote future, and instead argues that the most meaningful qualitative insights emerge when the researcher is present in the digital field of the social media page or feed and is acutely attuned to the meanings and subjectivities constructed there.

## Conclusion

In summary, the propagation of ideas around developments in digital technologies, especially their appropriation in various social settings should not be left to the monopoly or intellectual hegemony of one region. In particular, we need to emancipate our thoughts from the “shackles of [Western] intellectual imperialism” (Alatas 2000, 24). Thus, in keeping with the broader aims of *African Journalism Studies*, the object of this special issue is to initiate and facilitate research conversations between (digital) developments, concepts and methods in Africa and those unfolding elsewhere. In cultivating connections and bridging intellectual divides, we should acknowledge the fact that genuine globalisation demands that we be open to North-South conversations. This approach potentially opens avenues for critically assessing crude notions of the ‘digital divide’, which tend to essentialise or frame digital technology experiences in Africa as the ‘normative other’, without carefully considering *localised appropriations of technology* and their possible contribution to theory and methods. In other words, “[r]esearch from wider and varied contexts would provide a backdrop for testing [...] predominantly western examples, [methods] and theoretical frameworks” (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670), and thus helping to “refute erroneous generalisations, [and] interpretations” (Alatas 2000, 43) of particular actions and practices.

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